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## THE MUSICAL TIMES,

## And Singing Class Circular.

FEBRUARY 1, 1869.

## MUSICAL PITCH.

BY HENRY C. LUNN.

THAT music is an universal language has long been considered an inestimable advantage by all who believe that the immortal works of those who speak through its medium should be comprehended by the whole civilized world with equal facility. The thoughts of a composer, once committed to paper, are re-produced in every country with all their native eloquence; the magic notes within, above, and below the five-line staff requiring neither translation nor adaptation to fit them for a foreign ear. Even the vagueness so long existing as to the degree of velocity with which a composer intended his piece to be performed, has now been removed: the metronome tells us the time, as the staff tells us the note, existing in the mind of the author at the moment he wrote; and centuries after his death, therefore, we are enabled to perform his work, in all these essential features, precisely according to his original conception of it. But, strangely enough, in spite of this laudable desire to establish uniformity in the signs by which music is denoted, we have not yet decided as to the precise meaning of one of the most important of these signs, viz., the pitch of the note represented. We all, for instance, agree that a certain note shall be written in a certain place in the staff, but we disagree as to the number of vibrations by which this note shall be definitely fixed in the scale of musical sounds. To imagine a want of unanimity on a point of such vital interest in other matters is simply impossible. What, for example, would be the value of our table of weights and measures if we all disputed as to the quantity represented by the signs used? If we were compelled to receive two or three ounces less than a pound weight of an article, because the seller's idea of what constitutes a pound had gradually lowered; or were forced to sell one more rood in an acre of ground, because the buyer's notion of an acre had risen? Such instances as these appear absurd; but they are, in fact, not one bit more so than that the sign representing the musical sound A in one place should represent A sharp in another.

The gradual elevation of the musical pitch has been traced to many causes; but there can be little question that, with no standard which shall regulate that fatal tendency to "brilliancy," both with vocalists and instrumentalists, every conductor was, to a certain extent, justified in favouring this weak point, if by so doing he could conciliate the artists under his direction. Soprano singers who desired to exhibit their voices in showy solos, forced the instruments up to accord with a raised pitch which brought out their highest notes to the greatest advantage, and enabled them to take the lower ones with comparative ease. Stringed instruments (as Mr. Manns says, in an admirable letter on the subject) in order to be prepared for the wind instruments becoming gradually sharpened by the warmth of the breath and the heated atmosphere of a concert room, were tuned to a high pitch at the commencement of a performance; and, no doubt (as he also observes), the introduction of the pianoforte in combination with

the orchestra—in tune during the morning rehearsal in an empty room, but much too flat at the evening concert—materially assisted in promoting an evil which has now become unendurable. Thus, although no body of artists can be held blameless in the matter, it would be idle to say that the result is to be traced directly either to vocalists or instrumentalists; for as mutual agreement was to be obtained at any risk, and sharpening was supposed to be progress, those who favoured the movement were gratified to the top of their bent, and the conservative minority were compelled to submit in silence. Be the cause, however, what it may, the facts are indisputable, that the pitch has been raised in this country a semitone within the last fifty years, and a whole tone since the time of Handel. It is scarcely to be expected that, as a similar movement had been progressing on the Continent, no active steps should have been taken in any of the principal cities to legislate on the matter. At Stuttgart, for instance, a congress of musicians assembled in 1834, and recommended a pitch of 528 for C=440 for A, basing their calculations on 33 vibrations per second, instead of 32. But the most important meeting on the subject took place in Paris. A Commission to investigate the matter was appointed on the 17th July, 1858; and information was solicited from Germany, England, Belgium, Holland, Italy, and America. The conference included the names of Halevy, Auber, Berlioz, Meyerbeer, Rossini, Ambroise Thomas, and several scientific men who were interested in the subject; letters also being received from many who were unable to attend, amongst whom was David, who expressed himself strongly in favour of the lowering of the pitch. In the course of this discussion much valuable testimony as to the elevation of the diapason was produced; and several scores—notably those of Glück—were referred to in proof that he wrote at a time when the pitch was much lower than that existing at the time of the conference. A portion of the Report of this Commission is interesting, as showing the state of the pitch in England; and as reliable information from such practical men as the Messrs. Broadwood is historically valuable, we quote the paragraph relating to them as it appeared at the time.

"We have received from London a communication from Messrs. Broadwood, the noted pianofortemakers, who have been good enough to forward us three forks, of the various pitches employed in their establishment, each designed for a special purpose. The first, lower by fully a quarter of a tone than the Parisian pitch, was used by the London Philharmonic Society some 25 or 30 years ago. It has been judiciously preserved by the Messrs. Broadwood, as that most suitable to the voice; and they tune according to this extremely moderate pitch here furnished, those pianos intended for accompanying upon at vocal concerts. The second, much higher, being even raised above our own, is that to which Messrs. Broadwood generally tune their pianos, because it is nearly suited to the pitch of harmoniums, flutes, &c.: it is, in fact, the pitch of instrumentalists. The third, higher still, is that now in use by the Philharmonic Society. This extreme freedom of pitch must naturally have its inconveniences, and is probably hazardous to absolute correctness. In conclusion, Messrs. Broadwood assure us of the success of our researches, so interesting and important to the musical world."

Here, then, is positive proof that at the period of

this conference in Paris, Messrs. Broadwood had three distinct pitches, all of which were used at the same time in the same country. The assurance of success at the end of this communication was no doubt founded upon the conviction that as soon as a conclusion had been arrived at in France, active measures would be taken to enforce the use of the new pitch; whilst in England any conference of artists upon the subject would be unattended by any definite change. At all events, such was the result in both countries; for, although the *diapason normal* was fixed, by decree, on the 16th February, 1859, and was adopted, or came into force, in Paris on the 1st July of the same year, the pitch decided upon, after due deliberation, at a meeting of the Society of Arts in England, in 1860, was utterly disregarded; the members of the conference being presented with thanks for their trouble, and a neat little case containing two tuning-forks (C and A), which have long ago grown rusty for want of use. Although nothing arose out of this meeting which could materially affect the question at issue, it is interesting to glance at some of the facts and opinions which were elicited during the discussion. After adopting the report of a Committee appointed to consider the matter in the previous year (the substance of which report was that the establishment of an uniform pitch was both desirable and practicable), the meeting proceeded to consider the number of vibrations by which the note C should be definitely fixed. After a few words from Sir John Herschel, Mr. Cipriani Potter proposed the following resolution: "That the pitch of 528 vibrations for C be recommended for universal adoption in this country." It was scarcely to be expected that so radical a change as this could be carried without much opposition; for as, calculating from a theoretical C, which shall have one vibration in a second, we arrive at the C in the treble staff with 512 in the same time, it is obvious that, theoretically, if not practically, this was the number that would be battled for, notwithstanding the fact that at the Congress of Musicians at Stuttgard, which we have already referred to, 528 was the number eventually fixed upon. The resolution of Mr. Potter was seconded by Mr. F. Davison, who said that 528 vibrations for C, being only a quarter of a tone below the present pitch, existing orchestral instruments would not be rendered useless by the adoption of this standard. Mr. John Hullah and Mr. Henry Blagrove also spoke warmly in favour of Mr. Potter's resolution; but Sir John Herschel, as a practical mathematician, fondly clung to the 512; and, feeling that he could not carry his point at once, proposed as an amendment, "That whatever number of vibrations higher than 512 be adopted for C by this meeting, its adoption shall be considered provisional, and that the subject ought to be reconsidered after a lapse of, say, twenty years, with a view to the final adoption of a pitch of 512, which is that ultimately to be arrived at." This amendment was seconded by Mr. H. F. Chorley; but, on being put to the meeting, was negatived. A second amendment was then proposed by Mr. C. Wentworth Dilke (now Sir Wentworth Dilke), "That, although this meeting is of opinion that the pitch of 512 vibrations for C is the more correct standard, yet, looking to all the practical difficulties that surround the question, it recommends that the number of vibrations to be adopted in this country shall be 528." This amendment, seconded by Mr. Henry Leslie, was also negatived; and, after some unsuccessful attempts to induce Mr. Potter to

modify his resolution, it was carried precisely in its original form.

Now, in reading the report of this meeting, two things strike us as most extraordinary. In the first place, it should have been sufficiently obvious that this is not a mathematical, but a musical, subject. The requirements of voices and instruments ought alone to decide how many vibrations per second should determine the pitch of a note which shall be fixed upon as the standard; and, although mathematical science may be brought in to count these vibrations, there can be no possible practical reason why 512 for the note C should be assumed to be more correct than 528, a fact which was readily admitted at the French conference, the number there decided upon being 522. In the second place, it is a remarkable instance of the independence of the English character (which, however commendable in politics, is often most reprehensible in art) that, although the fixing of the *diapason normal* in Paris was actually the cause of this meeting at the Society of Arts, scarcely any notice should have been taken of the pitch there established, notwithstanding the fact that for upwards of a twelvemonth it had been adopted in Paris, and was gradually making its way throughout the Continent of Europe. As very little attention, as we have said, was bestowed on the decision of the Society of Arts, the meeting is, of course, only historically interesting; but it is to be regretted that so good an opportunity of fixing our diapason to agree with our Continental neighbours should have been lost. There can be little question, however, that so desirable a solution of the matter was only deferred; and the time has now arrived when a practical form will be given to the movement which we earnestly hope may be successful.

The evil of continually singing, not only at an extremely elevated pitch, but at a constantly varying one, has been long felt by vocalists; and as an instance of the difficulty experienced by instrumentalists, in consequence of this want of uniformity, we may mention that an eminent performer, acting on previous experience, provided himself for a musical tour with no less than *thirteen* concertinas, tuned to different pitches, varying to the extent of a tone and a half.

Much as this anomalous state of things was to be regretted, however, it was evident that with the experience of the Society of Arts before us, whatever might be done in France, the question never could be decided by any conference held in this country. The Englishman would adopt the dress, the habits, the manners—even the cookery of the French, because these had been settled by fashion; but never should it be said that he had been forced to accept their pitch, because this had been settled by decree. As might be anticipated, therefore, the reform eventually was demanded by those who had too severely felt the necessity for it. It was needless to expect that, until the evil effects of the elevation of the pitch had been forced upon the public, conductors would alter a state of things which had for so many years been tacitly submitted to. No sooner, however had a champion in the cause arisen than he was supported by almost the whole profession. The letter of Mr. Sims Reeves to the *Athenæum*, in which he declined to sing at the Sacred Harmonic Society, until the pitch was lowered, has placed the matter in such a purely practical form, that it has become not only an artistic, but a public, question. Letters from persons who have well studied the subject have

been published in the newspapers, and been received by ourselves, in which the existing state of the musical pitch in England is deplored, and a speedy remedy prayed for. Singers tell us that their voices are constantly strained beyond their legitimate powers; physicians confirm this by their experience in the treatment of vocalists who have suffered from this cause; violin players assure us that the growing tendency to sharpen occasions an undue tension of the strings (necessarily thin) which often causes them to snap; and Mr. Manns, in a letter which we have already quoted from, boldly asserts that "conductors hesitate to perform the monumental choral works of the great masters of the whole of the eighteenth, and the greater part of the first-half of the present century." It is obvious, therefore, that the letter of Mr. Reeves was the one thing wanting to introduce a reform, the desirability of which had been silently admitted for years; and when we know that many of the works, even of Mozart and Beethoven are, in England, approached with terror by all engaged in their interpretation, there can be little doubt that the sooner the change is made the better, both for art and artists. The firm establishment of the French pitch is now the grand point to be gained; no compromise should be made; for any variation of the *diapason normal* would be again ignoring the question of the absolute necessity of uniformity; and, by fixing a third pitch, not only virtually challenging a decision which has been arrived at by the most eminent men at the French conference, but compelling Continental artists who visit us to submit to a mere national caprice. In urging the adoption of this diapason, however, let us hope that in future the conductor may be all-powerful. It has been too much the custom for instrumentalists to tune to each other, and not to a fixed pitch given by the conductor; it therefore often happens, that at the end of the first part of a concert, the wind instruments (sharpened by the breath) bring up the strings to their standard; and thus the pitch of the whole orchestra is elevated. The conductor should declare the normal diapason at starting; and when an opportunity occurs, he should see that all the players agree with it, instead of leaving them to settle the matter amongst themselves. Once establish this law, and instrumentalists will be the kind friends, instead of the bitter enemies, of vocalists; for as the conductor's pitch would reign with despotic sway, tuning may, for the first time, mean flattening, as well as sharpening.

In conclusion, we sincerely hope that all persons interested in the question may give up small points of difference for the sake of unanimity. The French diapason has been fixed upon after mature deliberation; and has been proved to be essentially a practical one. Be it remembered, then, that in adopting it we not only have an excellent working standard pitch, but we set a worthy example to other nations which may still remain in a state of uncertainty upon the subject. Such a bond of brotherhood is worth striving for. As we have said in our opening remarks, the signs by which the art is expressed are intelligible alike to all the world: let then the practical exposition of these signs be equally agreed upon; for, although the confusion of tongues may have placed a barrier between man and man, music—which has ever been, and ever will be, the gentle medium between man and his Creator—should at least be an universal language.

## MADAME POLKO'S REMINISCENCES OF FELIX MENDELSSOHN BARTHOLDY.

MESSRS. LONGMANS have here contributed one more to the many interesting works lately issued by them in connection with the career of this composer. Were it possible to add to the high estimate already formed of Mendelssohn the man, apart from Mendelssohn the artist, this book—the graceful tribute of one of his most ardent admirers—would certainly do much towards effecting this object. It is true that Madame Polko, fascinated as she was in her youthful days by a genius so brilliant, and a nature so pure and gentle, writes of Mendelssohn as an enthusiast; but her reminiscences include so many incidents in which others bore a conspicuous part, that we have indisputable proofs of the esteem in which he was held by all who were intimately acquainted with him. It is, indeed, interesting to read how, as a boy of fifteen, when Moscheles (then scarcely thirty years of age) gave his first concert in Berlin, he listened with breathless excitement to the comparatively mature composer's E flat major concerto. How, at a supper party at his father's house after the concert (where, besides Moscheles, Hummel, Berger, Zelter, and other celebrities were present) the "handsome boy in a jacket" stood motionless beside the piano, whilst Hummel and Moscheles were performing; and then, on being pressed to play himself, how he burst into tears and rushed from the room. The sensitive nature of his youthful pupil could scarcely have been sufficiently evident to the somewhat stern Zelter, or he would hardly have met the boy's imploring looks by again requesting him to play; still less could he have wounded his feelings by exclaiming,—“What on earth is the matter with you, boy? Are you going to show the white feather, after playing fearlessly in grand concerts, and before our Göthe, in Weimar? What must I write to him about you?—that you have become a poltroon?” Tears, indeed, could be the only reply to such an uncouth rebuff. Moscheles must have been somewhat surprised when, after becoming instructor to the young Felix, at the earnest request of his mother, he heard him, two days after the memorable supper-party we have mentioned, play the E flat concerto which had so delighted him at the concert, with all the fire, impetuosity, and musical feeling of a finished artist. The intellectual training of Mendelssohn must have been materially aided by his constant intercourse with men of the highest mark in science, art, and literature. At his own home not only was found that life of love and peace which springs spontaneously from a mutual family affection, but he was surrounded by a constant atmosphere of intellect; music, of course, forming a principal part in the delightful meetings continually taking place; but conversation, lifted far above the dead level of ordinary “society,” invariably reigning supreme. When Mendelssohn left this happy home, with his father, to seek the valuable counsel of Cherubini, in Paris, there can be little doubt that he carried with him a mind so cultivated to the appreciation of all that was high and noble, that the debasing influences of the world could have little or no effect upon his character. The journey of the young composer to Scotland, with his dear friend Klingeman, was an event which he always looked back to with the utmost pleasure; and were it not that it might be considered a violation of a sacred trust, we should be glad if those letters, so full of youthful enthusiasm, which he wrote to Moscheles on